

The limits of the 'Liberal imagination'

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The Limits of the 'Liberal Imagination': Britain, Broadcasting, and Apartheid South Africa, 1948-94

On the 14th May 1987, the BBC's Africa correspondent, Michael Buerk, alongside his Independent Television News rival Peter Sharpe, received written notice of the decision of the South African government not to renew their work permits. Respectively in post for four and eight years, Buerk and Sharpe were given ten days to leave the country.¹ While these high-profile expulsions led to a crescendo of international outcry, the refusal of visas to foreign journalists in South Africa had by this point been going on for well over a decade.² Consistently, the apartheid regime justified their actions by alleging that foreign journalists were enemies of the nation, instigating protest where it did not exist and goading opposition forces into action. In response, time and again, South Africa banned, arrested and intimidated foreign journalists, a phenomenon that came to a boiling point after the declaration of a State of Emergency in 1985.

In the dying throes of apartheid, the regime tried to prevent international news organisations *en masse* from reporting in South Africa.³ For journalists that remained, not only was there the constant threat of state violence to contend with (as well as a broader culture of violence) but also the threat of jail (the maximum penalty for

¹ David Beresford, 'South Africa Expels British TV Men', *The Guardian*, 15 May.1987.

² See, for example, the refusal to give visas to *This Week* journalists, cited below (fn 78).

³ BBC Written Archives Centre (WAC), Caversham, Reading. WAC, R78/3, 124/1, South Africa, Board of Management minutes, 18 Nov. 1985.

breaching emergency regulations was a ten year prison sentence).⁴ Through these tactics, by the late 1980s the South African regime had succeeded in undermining news broadcasts and preventing international media from making current affairs programmes about apartheid. The Foreign Editor of BBC Television News informed colleagues in 1988 that South African policy had ‘in effect wiped out BBC current affairs’.⁵ To BBC South Africa radio correspondent Graham Leach, ‘Pretoria [had] won’. He bemoaned: ‘The television protests of black protests have disappeared from the world’s television screens’.⁶

This article explores the responses of the British broadcast media to this state of affairs, and to the apartheid regime over its lifespan, making the argument that broadcasting offers particular insights into the British state’s interactions with apartheid and extreme regimes more generally in the postcolonial period. Reading British state values from broadcasting is tempting because of the extent to which British broadcasters, especially the BBC, have been seen, and have seen themselves, as part of the nation’s structure of governance. Of course, some areas of broadcasting such as the BBC World Service, until recently at least, were directly funded by the government, leading Cannadine to describe it as ‘the Empire of the air’.⁷ More generally, Seaton has analysed the BBC ‘as part of the constitutional arrangements of

⁴ Michael Buerk, *The Road Taken: an Autobiography* (London, 2004), 321.

⁵ WAC, R78/3, 125/1, South Africa, John Mahoney’s notes for L Hodgson, Briefing Paper in Preparation for the Dinner for the South African Ambassador, 18 Feb. 1988.

⁶ WAC, R78/3, 125/1, South Africa, Leach’s notes for L Hodgson, Briefing Paper in Preparation for the Dinner for the South African Ambassador, 18 Feb. 1988.

⁷ David Cannadine, *Ornamentalism: How the British Saw their Empire* (London, 2001), 191.

the nation’ and this certainly seems to reflect the way that its journalists were seen abroad.⁸ Michael Buerk recalled that BBC correspondents in South Africa ‘were treated like alternative British ambassadors’.⁹

The contents of television or radio programmes, in-and-of-themselves, tell us little about the views of the British government and we should be slow to assume that broadcasting had the power to change or shape public opinion.¹⁰ But broadcasting was a terrain of political debate and conflict, a space that was fought over by those inside and outside the industry.¹¹ Those who had a view on South Africa and apartheid frequently tried to express it through broadcasting and correspondingly often attempted to suppress the views of adversaries, amid strongly held beliefs that television could effect change.

Meanwhile, driven by a specific understanding of British values, the BBC and independent channels strove to present what they considered to be a balanced and objective analysis of apartheid, the thinking behind which tells us much, this article will argue, about broader state responses to the South African regime. Tensioned by a

⁸ J. Seaton, ‘The BBC and the “Hidden Wiring” of the British Constitution: the Imposition of the Broadcasting Ban in 1988’, *Twentieth Century British History*, xxiv:iii (2013), 448-71, 469.

⁹ Buerk, *The Road Taken*, 222-3.

¹⁰ See David Morley, *Television, Audiences and Cultural Studies* (London and New York, 1992), S. Hall, ‘Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse’, *Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies Occasional Paper*, Sept. 1973 and D. Morrison, ‘Cultural and Moral Authority: the Presumption of Television’, *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, dcxxv, (2009), 116-27.

¹¹ L. Black, ‘Whose Finger on the Button? British Television and the Politics of Cultural Control’, *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, xxv:iv, (2005), 547-75.

complicated moral and legal position relating to the need for broadcasting neutrality, and underwritten by a specific postcolonial sensibility, clear opposition to apartheid struggled to emerge on British television and radio. Indeed, this article argues, British broadcasters, and Britain more generally, ultimately failed to understand the brutal realities of apartheid or to articulate opposition to it.

The British state's relationship with Apartheid was shaped by long-standing British ambivalence on race and empire, affinity with South African whites and business interests, while the fear of the Cold War (and Communist infiltration) similarly ensured the continuation of a positive relationship between Britain and South Africa during these years; but underpinning all of the above considerations, I argue, was the British 'liberal imagination'. Lionel Trilling explained the 'liberal imagination' as a mind frame that 'unconsciously limit[ed] its view of the world to what it can deal with', evading the horrors of extremism.¹²

The idea that responses to extreme regimes are governed by incomprehension has been signposted within the historical analysis of trauma, especially with reference to the Holocaust. Listening to Holocaust testimony, documentary maker Claude Lanzmann explained, drove a 'refusal of understanding' on his part, which became the only 'ethical' and 'only possible' attitude towards the horror stories he

¹² See Lionel Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination: Essays on Literature and Society* (Oxford, 1981), p.v.

This analysis follows Tony Kushner's reading of Trilling with regards to British responses to the Holocaust in *The Holocaust and the Liberal Imagination: a Social and Cultural History* (Oxford, 1994), 272-3.

encountered.¹³ As Felman has argued, experiences outside a person's 'frame of reference' remain 'historically invisible, unreal, and can only be encountered by a systematic disbelief'.¹⁴ Similar responses within post-Apartheid South Africa shaped the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Committee. In this forum, as one committee member attested, the words of survivors could only distance the committee from actual events, 'limiting our participation in the act of remembering'.¹⁵

On the terms of the 'liberal imagination', South African apartheid was understood by postwar British governments with reference to the nation's own experiences, specifically of British imperial governance.¹⁶ The mediation of television could and sometimes did push the boundaries of this imagination, as fictionalised forms, 'an imaginative medium', could burst bubbles of incomprehension with stories and visual images.¹⁷ Yet, whatever its potential, the production of television mostly sought to

¹³ Lanzmann cited in Cathy Caruth (ed), *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Baltimore and London, 1995), 155.

¹⁴ Shoshana Felman, 'Camus' *The Plague*, or a Monument to Witnessing' in Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History* (New York and London, 1992), 93-119, 103.

¹⁵ Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela, *A Human Being Died that Night: a South African Story of Forgiveness* (Boston and New York, 2003), 85.

¹⁶ Jon Lawrence, 'Paternalism, Class and the British Path to Modernity' in Simon Gunn and James Vernon (eds.), *The Peculiarities of Liberal Modernity in Imperial Britain* (Berkeley, LA and London, 2011), 147-64, 147. Also see Cannadine, *Ornamentalism*, xiv.

¹⁷ Felman, 'Camus' *The Plague*, or a Monument to Witnessing', 105.

rationalise apartheid and control graphic images, maintaining imaginative constraints on what the nation did and didn't see.

Britain, Opposition to Apartheid and the 'Liberal Imagination'

While some fought long and hard against apartheid, British responses at all levels were mostly equivocal, hostile to apartheid ideology but simultaneously uncertain that the regime was all bad, or entirely responsible for the state South Africa was in. Attitudes towards the regime, and the racial concepts which underpinned it, were not static, but British positions in government and civil society over the lifespan of apartheid remained fairly consistent, described across various Governments by Hyam and Henshaw in terms of 'rise, ebb, and resurgence'.¹⁸ Over the course of the regime, British government criticism of South Africa's racial policies tended to be muted and focused on what was perceived to be excessive or extreme violence, though even on these terms there was a tendency to defer to the wisdom of the apartheid state on how it was best to deal with its un-franchised Black population.¹⁹ This mode of thinking ensured both that apartheid would rarely be welcomed, but also that its inherent unreason and murderous mentality would not be fully understood in

¹⁸ Ronald Hyam and Peter Henshaw, *The Lion and the Springbok: Britain and South Africa since the Boer War* (Cambridge, 2003), 307. Also see Roger Fieldhouse, *Anti-Apartheid: a History of a Movement in Britain* (London, 2005), 157 and Rob Skinner, *The Foundations of Anti-Apartheid: Liberal Humanitarians and Transnational Activists in Britain and the United States, c.1919-64* (Basingstoke and New York, 2010), 156.

¹⁹ See, for example, the House of Lords Debate on 'South Africa and the Commonwealth' in the aftermath of the Sharpeville massacre and South Africa's withdrawal from the Commonwealth. Hansard (Lords), Vol: 229 Cols: 1255-334, 31 Mar. 1961.

Britain, as politicians instead attempted to rationalise apartheid within a British *weltanschauung*.

British interventions mostly championed a middle position of moderation, neither embracing the Apartheid State nor the forces bent on its overthrow. Churches and Trade Unions sought dialogue with their white equivalents and gave minimal encouragement to the idea of Black majority rule.²⁰ At government level, the conciliatory if critical position taken by Britain at the United Nations in 1963 remained consistent until the late 1980s. ‘Ought we not to give consideration’, Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Peter Thomas asked the UN’s Special Committee on the policies of Apartheid, ‘to the possibilities of finding some bridge, some compromise between the ultimate objectives of the South African government...and the concept of fully multi-racial society’.²¹ In this mind-frame, Black opponents of the regime were frequently cast as just as intransigent and dangerous as staunch supporters of apartheid. In 1957, the British High Commission described the increased radicalism of Black challenges to apartheid as ‘one of the saddest developments’ in the country.²² Thirty years later, Thatcher still saw fit to dismiss the ANC as a ‘typical terrorist organisation’.²³

²⁰ On the position of Trade Unions, see J. Major, ‘The Trades Union Congress and Apartheid, 1948-70’, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, (2005), xxxi:iii, 477-93. Skinner cites Church responses in comparison in *The Foundations of Anti-Apartheid*, 142.

²¹ National Archives of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, Kew, London (NA), DO181/1, Speech by Minister of State for Foreign Affairs to the UN Special Committee on the Policies of Apartheid, 18 Oct. 1963.

²² NA, DO35/10559, RH Belcher, Office of the High Commission in South Africa to Sir Charles Dixon, Commonwealth Relations Office, 29 Jul. 1957.

In this mind frame, the damage caused to British/South African relations by the onset of apartheid was neither immediate nor total. Daniel Malan's election victory in 1948 marked a triumph for Afrikaner Nationalism and a challenge to postwar international trends towards anti-racism and decolonisation.²⁴ It did not, however, trigger an immediate falling out with a British government which was sufficiently motivated by a desire to maintain the Commonwealth and protect its interests, and had no urgent desire to take a stand for South Africa's Black majority.²⁵ As Dubow has argued, British governments may have seen apartheid as 'regrettable and probably unworkable but offset this discomfort by insisting that maintaining good relations with the country was vital'.²⁶

Ambivalence towards the apartheid state was partly driven by realpolitik, nurtured by trade and investment vital to Britain's economy, and protected by South Africa's utility as an ally in the Cold War.²⁷ Yet these very real political and economic foundations of friendship were underpinned by a deeper rationale, undervalued in the

²³ Andrew McEwan, 'Thatcher Hits Back in Row on Sanctions', *The Times*, 19 Oct. 1987.

²⁴ See Ryan Irwin, *Gordian Knot: Apartheid and the Unmaking of the Liberal World Order* (Oxford, 2012) 6.

²⁵ Hyam and Henshaw, *The Lion and the Springbok*, 153-4.

²⁶ Saul Dubow, *Apartheid, 1948-1994* (Oxford, 2014), 51. Also see Skinner, *The Foundations of Anti-Apartheid*, 118.

²⁷ Hyam and Henshaw, *The Lion...*, p.255. Belich has argued that British investment accounted for 62% of overall foreign investment in South Africa in 1956 in James Belich, *Replenishing the Earth: The Settler Revolution and the Rise of the Angloworld* (Oxford, 2009), 386. Also see Irwin, *Gordian Knot*, 135.

existing historical analysis of the relationship between the two States, rooted in the idiosyncrasies of British imperial thinking on race and decolonisation. British imperial approaches to racial difference were not the same as those of the apartheid state, but there were considerable similarities surrounding concepts of white superiority and the need for white stewardship of Black and Asian populations. After all, as Cannadine has argued, the mentality of the British Empire had always carried its own ideas of racial ‘superiority and inferiority’.²⁸ On these terms, Schwarz has noted that apartheid was ‘no last-minute imposition’ by Afrikaner Nationalists, ‘but the founding principle on which the Union of South Africa...was created, and sanctified by Westminster’.²⁹ Leon de Kock has concluded that the apartheid regime ‘merely took the terms inherited from an earlier, compromised era of English liberalism and changed the pattern of the seam’.³⁰ A paper written in the Commonwealth Relations Office in 1959 on South Africa’s ‘Racial Policy’ confirmed this affinity. ‘The Nationalist Party’s policy of apartheid is a development of the policy, followed by South African governments since 1910, of the separation of the races to avoid racial friction and to ensure the maintenance of “White South Africa” against the great preponderance of non-White peoples’.³¹

²⁸ Cannadine, *Ornamentalism*, p.123.

²⁹ Bill Schwarz, *Memories of Empire, Volume 1: The White Man’s World* (Oxford, 2011), 212.

³⁰ Leon de Kock, Louise Bethlehem and Sonja Laden (eds.), *South Africa in the Global Imaginary* (Pretoria, 2004), 16.

³¹ NA, DO35/10559, Paper by the Commonwealth Relations Office on ‘South African Government’s Racial Policy’, 19 Feb. 1959.

Ostensibly, the most significant difference between British and apartheid thinking on race relations related to the principle of ‘gradualism’ that dominated much of British ‘liberal’ imperial rhetoric.³² According to this principle, Black and Asian populations within the Empire were constructed as aspiring to the standards of British civilisation, which would ultimately yield for them equality and self-governance, but allowed for their designation as ‘legitimate objects of liberal intervention’ in the meantime.³³ Self-government for Black and Asian populations was imagined over the *longue durée* by many British imperialists, but this nonetheless differentiated British approaches to those of apartheid ideologues, who mostly saw racial differences as inherent and permanent, with separate development being the answer.³⁴ On these terms, Irwin has presented the intellectual vision of apartheid as anathema to western liberalism, a vision of the future that drew ‘a sharp line between the Union and the world community’.³⁵

³² See Catherine Hall, *Civilising Subjects: Metropole and Colony in the English Imagination* (London, 2002), 17 and A. Sartori, ‘The British Empire and its Liberal Mission’, *Journal of Modern History*, (2006), lxxii: iii, 78:3, 623-42, 633.

³³ G. Harrison, ‘Campaign Africa: Exploring the Relationship of Africa and its Role in British Identity’, *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, xv:iv, (2013), 528-47, 533 and Gunn and Vernon, *The Peculiarities of Liberal Modernity*, 9.

³⁴ For imperial thinking on the necessarily slow pace of Black/Asian self-rule see P. Cain, ‘Character, “Ordered Liberty”, and the Mission to Civilise: British Moral Justification of Empire, 1870-1914’, *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, xl:iv (2012), 557-78, 566. For apartheid thinking on racial difference see Aletta Norval, *Understanding Apartheid Discourse* (London and New York, 1996).

³⁵ Irwin, *Gordian Knot*, 20.

Indeed, the reluctance of the apartheid state to countenance the idea of a colour-blind society as envisaged in the ANC's Freedom Charter, even as a future goal, was perceived by Britain and the United States as out of step with the times, a difference of opinion that was brought to world attention by Harold Macmillan's 'Winds of Change' speech to the South African parliament in 1960.³⁶ The extent of this disagreement, however, should not be overstated. Consistently, as Schwarz has noted, British politicians deferred to those in the Empire who 'knew the native'.³⁷ After all, as the British Permanent Representative told the UN Security Council in 1963, if Apartheid was to be considered 'sui generis' then it was important to recognise that the racial 'situation' in South Africa was itself 'sui generis'.³⁸ Ultimately, Britain's racial critique of South Africa can be defined in terms of the nation's own ambivalence on race, grounded in centuries of 'liberal' Empire, which had always justified discrimination, and articulated racial equality only in a far-away imagined future.

Despite the British government's equivocal position on South Africa, hostility to apartheid grew in other parts of British society through the 1950s, and developed into some sustained and significant blocks of opposition by the 1960s.³⁹ Opponents of apartheid were inspired to act by the accelerating violence of the South African state

³⁶ See Dubow, *Apartheid*, 74-5, Hyam and Henshaw, *The Lion...* 34-5 and Irwin, *Gordian Knot*, 19.

³⁷ Schwarz, *White Man's World*, 22-3.

³⁸ NA, DO 181/1, Speech by Sir Patrick Dean to the UN Security Council, 4 Dec. 1963.³⁸

³⁸ Schwarz, *White Man's World*, 22-3.

³⁸ NA, DO 181/1, Speech by Sir Patrick Dean to the UN Security Council, 4 Dec. 1963.

³⁹ See Fieldhouse, *Anti-Apartheid*, 4-66 and Skinner, *The Foundations of Anti-Apartheid*, 118-55.

(epitomised in the Sharpeville and Langa Massacre of 1960) and the growing international opposition to the regime. Indeed, opposition to the extremism of the apartheid government has led Webster to conclude that Britain as a whole ‘re-established liberal credentials’ through ‘the condemnation of apartheid’.⁴⁰ Similarly, Harrison has argued that British liberal values clearly constructed South Africa’s brand of racism as beyond the pale. ‘From any kind of liberal perspective, apartheid was sufficiently heinous to endorse a wide range of actions to undermine it’.⁴¹

This article argues that claims of this nature are significantly overstated. While it is undoubtedly true that protest against apartheid peaked at moments of crisis such as Sharpeville, neither the British state nor the public moved decisively towards anti-apartheid over the course of the regime, a position rooted, I shall argue, in a failure to understand the regime’s true nature. As late as 1982 the Anti-Apartheid Movement still saw its ‘greatest challenge’ in terms of creating in Britain ‘a much more active climate of concern’ about South Africa. Support, it noted, was still difficult to come by at ‘a local level’.⁴² The limits of public anti-Apartheid sentiment was similarly understood within the Civil Service. Writing to the Consulate General in Johannesburg in 1983, Jeremy Varcoe (from the Foreign Office’s South Africa

⁴⁰ W. Webster, *Englishness and Empire* (Oxford, 2007), 177.

⁴¹ Harrison, ‘Campaign Africa...’, 539.

⁴² London Metropolitan Archives, Anti-Apartheid Movement MSS (London), LMA/4421/01/01/03, ‘A Campaigning Framework’, Sept 1982-Dec. 1983.

Department) explained: 'The average man on the proverbial Clapham Omnibus is probably by inclination only concerned that Test Cricket should continue'.⁴³

While different administrations in Britain were varyingly oppositional to the apartheid regime, Britain's overall stance remained that of a critical friend, an on-going relationship reflected in Margaret Thatcher's reluctance to increase sanctions against South Africa in the 1980s, a decision which the Anti-Apartheid movement claimed 'encouraged' and gave 'comfort' to the regime.⁴⁴ British liberal values, this article will argue, in fact mostly prevented the regime from being seen, and dealt with, as the brutal international pariah that it was (despite the anti-apartheid stance of some Britons). Ultimately, a perceived familial affinity between the two states fuelled a sustained relationship between Britain and South Africa, and preserved a closeness that was evident in the evolution of South African broadcasting.

Affinity and Uncertainty: Broadcaster and State on South Africa

In broadcasting, as between states, relations between Britain and South Africa were built on long colonial foundations of cooperation and conflict. The scars of British atrocities in the Boer Wars, alongside on-going discrimination against Afrikaner language and culture, ensured there was no love lost between Britain and most Afrikaner Nationalists. Nonetheless, in excess of a third of South Africa's white population were expatriate Britons who continued to identify with the old country to

⁴³ NA, FO105/1519, Jeremy Varcoe to CT Brant, 19 Apr. 1983. Varcoe went on to note that the 'fair play' of the average Briton 'can be invoked'.

⁴⁴ LMA/4421/01/01/001, Annual General Meeting of the AAM, Resolutions Adopted, 28 Oct. 1984.

varying extents, in many cases more than they identified with South Africa itself.⁴⁵ This sense of affinity was not unidirectional, and was underpinned by South African service in the First and Second World Wars. South Africa's white population, alongside other 'white' Commonwealth nations, was constructed as familiar in postwar Britain through the language of 'stock, blood, family', in what Schwarz has described as a 'sort of ethnic populism', which fed the 'liberal imagination' at every turn.⁴⁶ Even after South Africa's 1961 departure from the Commonwealth, Sanders has noted, 'its white population was consistently portrayed in the British media as being, to a certain extent, the responsibility of Great Britain'.⁴⁷

The foundations of the relationship between British and South African broadcasters were similarly built on bonds of colonial affinity, and only gradually eroded by the issue of apartheid. Following an invitation from South African Prime Minister Barry Hertzog, the BBC's first Director General, John Reith, visited South Africa to offer advice on national broadcasting in 1934, publishing a report on 'Broadcasting and Development' in South Africa in 1935.⁴⁸ Reith's report led to the reorganisation of South African broadcasting from disparate commercial roots into a united public

⁴⁵ For details of British settlement in South Africa see Belich, *Replenishing the Earth*, 373-83.

⁴⁶ Schwarz, *White Man's World*, 59 and 71. Bailkin has described this tendency in terms of the 'afterlife' of Empire in Jordana Bailkin, *The Afterlife of Empire* (Berkeley, 2012), 237. Also see Webster, *Englishness and Empire*, 82, Hakan Thorn, *Anti-Apartheid and the Emergence of a Global Civil Society* (Basingstoke and New York, 2006), 76 and Fieldhouse, *Anti-Apartheid*, 214.

⁴⁷ James Sanders, *South Africa and the International Media 1972-9: a Struggle for Representation* (London, 2000), 211.

⁴⁸ See Ruth Tomaselli, Keyan Tomaselli and Johan Muller, *Broadcasting in South Africa* (London, 1989), 31. Reith's report, 'Broadcasting and Development', is held in the WAC, File E1/61, Countries: Africa.

service through the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC), which came into being on the 1st August 1936 following new legislation.⁴⁹ The SABC was founded very much in the BBC's image, with a statutory commitment to broadcasting impartiality, funded by licence fee.⁵⁰ Potter has described it as a 'BBC-style broadcasting authority' while Harrison explains that the SABC 'virtually adopted the BBC charter'.⁵¹ This closeness was clear to contemporaries. According to the *Johannesburg Star*, Reith made 'no recommendations' to the South African government 'that were not accepted'.⁵²

The relationship between the BBC and the SABC went beyond shared structures and policy. Despite considerable conflict during the apartheid era, which will be discussed below, the SABC continued to mine heavily BBC material for its radio, and later television programming, to the extent that some Black South Africans, as late as 1988, were unable to differentiate clearly between the two providers. When BBC official Dorothy Grenfell-Williams visited the country, she reported back, 'Some black South Africans I talked to gave me the impression that they thought the SABC and the BBC were branches of the same organisation'.⁵³

⁴⁹ Tomaselli, Tomaselli and Muller, *Broadcasting in South Africa*, 31.

⁵⁰ Broadcasting Act (Act 22), 1936. South Africa adopted some commercially-funded broadcasting from the birth of *Springbok Radio* in 1950.

⁵¹ Simon Potter, *Broadcasting Empire: the BBC and the British World, 1922-70* (Oxford, 2012), 181 and David Harrison, *The White Tribe of Africa: South Africa in Perspective* (London, 1981), 207.

⁵² *Johannesburg Star*, 23 Jun. 1962.

⁵³ WAC, File R78/3, 125/1, South Africa, Note from Dorothy Grenfell-Williams (Acting Assistant Head of African Service), on her visit to South Africa, 22 Feb. 1988.

Without doubt, relations between British and South African broadcasting were strained by apartheid. From the South African perspective, the growing distance was evident from as early as 1950, when the SABC took the decision to stop broadcasting BBC news, a move described by Potter as a ‘sign of things to come’.⁵⁴ But the key parting of ways came in 1959 when Piet Meyer was appointed Chairman of SABC’s Board of Control. Meyer was a leading member of the Afrikaner Nationalist secret society, the Broederbond, becoming the organisation’s Chairman in 1960.⁵⁵ His appointment at SABC signalled the South African government’s determination to use its broadcasting network as a political weapon. Following the retirement of Gideon Roos as Director General in 1961, a man who had ‘clung to the Reithian ideal of the independence of broadcasting’, the path was clear for Meyer to create radio and later television which would serve to support the South African government and undermine opposition.⁵⁶ As David Dimbleby explained in a BBC documentary about the Broederbond in 1979, when watching the SABC after 1960, ‘you can see there is a secret hand...a pattern of controlling things’.⁵⁷

Anti-Apartheid and the Principle of Broadcasting Neutrality

⁵⁴ See Potter, *Broadcasting Empire*, 147 and Tomaselli, Tomaselli and Muller, *Broadcasting in South Africa*, 54. Cricket commentator John Arlott claimed that it was a comment from him on BBC Radio’s ‘Any Questions?’ programme in March 1950 which led the South Africans to stop broadcasting BBC news. Arlott told audiences that the South African government was ‘predominately a Nazi one’. See David Allen, *Arlott: the Authorised Biography* (London, 1994), 145.

⁵⁵ Harrison, *The White Tribe of Africa*, 207.

⁵⁶ Tomaselli, Tomaselli and Muller, *Broadcasting in South Africa*, 56.

⁵⁷ White Tribe of Africa, ‘A Band of Brothers’, tx. 15 Jan. 1979.

Almost immediately after Gideon Roos' departure the relationship between South African and British broadcasters soured significantly. At the core of the problem lay allegations from the South African government that British broadcasters were not maintaining their own rules of impartiality when it came to covering the country. As the South Africans well knew, both the BBC and ITV were committed to politically neutral news presentation by law and precedent. Since the time of the Sykes Committee report of 1923 the BBC had committed itself to broadcasting that was free from 'any suspicion of political bias'.⁵⁸ In the Corporation's Prescribing Memoranda (part of its Licence and Agreement) it vowed to maintain political neutrality, a promise reiterated periodically in formal letters between the BBC and the British government.⁵⁹ For their part, the independent channels were bound by the Television Act of 1954 (and subsequent legislation) which committed broadcasters to present news with 'due accuracy and impartiality'.⁶⁰

Furious at what was perceived to be the abandonment of its own agreed standards, SABC attacked BBC coverage of South Africa live on air in 1963. A broadcast by Alexander Steward, who had been Director of Information at South Africa House in London between 1955-62, entitled 'South Africa and the BBC', accused the BBC of 'stack[ing] the cards' against the South African government and behaving as 'a law unto itself'.⁶¹ At the heart of SABC's objection was the idea that the BBC had failed

⁵⁸ Broadcasting Committee (1923), Cmnd 1951.

⁵⁹ Charles Curran, *A Seamless Robe: Broadcasting – Philosophy and Practice* (London, 1979), 68-71.

⁶⁰ Television Act, 1954, Section 6, Subsections d and g.

⁶¹ Steward published a polemical defence of apartheid entitled *You are Wrong, Father Huddleston* (London, 1956).

to be neutral. Steward complained that the Corporation was 'far from impartial in its selection of facts, or of the people or the programmes it chooses to describe situations about and of which it has already made up its mind'.⁶² Although in this instance one of the independent companies (Associated Rediffusion) was singled out for praise in contrast to the BBC, in general South African officials laid accusations of bias against all British television networks. Time and again, from the 1960s to the end of the regime, officials at South Africa's embassy challenged broadcasters over what they perceived as anti-government content in news and current affairs broadcasts. Indeed, complaints came not only from the Embassy but also from pressure groups and parliamentarians that were either sympathisers with, and/or in the pay of, the South Africans.⁶³ Consistently at the heart of South African protests was the claim that all that was wanted was broadcasting impartiality. In the face of what they considered to be unacceptably hostile coverage the South African regime refused visas to numerous journalists, who were also frequently victims of violence and harassment by the apartheid state.

⁶² WAC, E1/1 380/1, 'South Africa and the BBC', tx. 22 Mar. 1963. For analysis see H.Smith, 'Apartheid, Sharpeville and "Impartiality": the Reporting of South Africa on BBC Television, 1948-61', *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, xiii:iii, (1993), 151-98.

⁶³ For example, a group named the 'anti-demonstration organisation' attempted to persuade the British government to prosecute the BBC under Race Relations legislation following a 1970 episode of *Panorama*. NA, LO2/463, Race Relations Act (Section 6), Norman Baker to Frederick Elwyn Jones, 13 May. 1970. BBC officials were criticised by a group of Conservative MPs for the nature of broadcasting on South Africa in a House of Commons meeting in 1972. WAC, R78/2 763/1, Meeting between Hill, Curran, and backbench Conservatives, 23 Feb.1972. In the 1970s, the South African government spent 85 million Rand trying to influence the global media, a secret campaign that led to national scandal. See Dubow, *Apartheid*, 191-2 and Sanders, *South Africa...*, 3.

While there is no doubt about the apartheid state's brutality towards journalists, there nonetheless remains a question concerning whether or not South Africa had a case concerning the bias of the British media. As Sanders has pointed out, the regime perceived itself as 'engaged in a "war of representation"' against anti-apartheid forces, who themselves were working very hard to influence foreign media against the regime.⁶⁴ While South African endeavours carried more than a whiff of paranoia, the forces ranged against apartheid were substantial and influential. These were epitomised by opposition within the United Nations, which had been transformed, Irwin explains, by the 'sudden emergence of almost forty non-European states' in the 1960s.⁶⁵ In 1963, the Africa Group in the United Nations submitted a successful resolution of principled objection to apartheid to the General Assembly, and secured the establishment of a UN special committee on the subject.⁶⁶ Despite later retrenchment by Britain and the USA, pressure from the UN continued.⁶⁷ A Centre against Apartheid was established in 1976, a new arms embargo secured in 1977, while 1978-9 was declared 'International Anti-Apartheid Year', to be marked by a global propaganda effort against the regime.

The influence of this anti-apartheid campaign on the British broadcast media was questionable. British broadcasters were instinctively underwhelmed by the UN's

⁶⁴ Sanders, *South Africa...*, 63-5.

⁶⁵ Irwin, *Gordian Knot*, 12.

⁶⁶ Irwin, *Gordian Knot*, 55-8.

⁶⁷ Irwin has argued that the Vietnam War and a broader fear of criticism in the UN led the USA to a more conservative position on apartheid by the end of the 1960s, *Gordian Knot*, 8.

position, which went against the grain of self-fashioned neutrality and their instinctive belief that there were two sides to the South African story. The Director of News and Current Affairs at the BBC responded to the UN's call for opposition: 'There was absolutely no doubt about the BBC's attitude to any request that it should broadcast such information. It was not a government organisation and did not broadcast propaganda'.⁶⁸ This view was shared, without question, by executives in the independent networks, who similarly did not want their channels to be conduits of anti-apartheid agitation.⁶⁹ Nonetheless, this commitment to British broadcasting neutrality was not a simple matter either in theory or practice.

Specifically, British broadcasting's commitment to neutrality was conditioned by an understanding among many executives and programme makers that there were some issues about which it was inappropriate to be neutral and impartial. As Director General of the BBC, Hugh Carleton Greene, who had previously worked as Director of News and Current Affairs, famously articulated this idea in a 1965 speech on 'The Conscience of the Programme Director', putting on record an attitude which was already influential within news and current affairs broadcasting.

Nor do I believe that we should be impartial about certain things like racialism or extreme forms of political belief...The actions and aspirations of those who proclaim these ideas are so clearly damaging to society, to peace and good order, even in their immediate effects, that to put at their disposal the

⁶⁸ WAC, R3/60/2, News and Current Affairs minutes, RTL Francis, 17 Jan. 1978

⁶⁹ See ITA Archive, Special Collections, University of Bournemouth, File 3996150, IBA Meeting, 23 Feb. 1978.

enormous power of broadcasting would be to conspire with them against society.⁷⁰

Having served in the Second World War supporting Allied propaganda, and been present at the liberation of Dachau concentration camp, Greene had strong ideas about giving broadcasting access to those who he perceived would undermine democracy.⁷¹

The problem with his influential dictum concerned who did, and did not, fall within its scope. To many broadcasters and commentators, as we have seen more broadly in British politics and society, apartheid South Africa was an ally, making difficult if controversial decisions about how to handle race relations. On these terms, the State did not deserve proscription under Greene's dictum. One Radio 3 broadcast in 1972 complained that British coverage of South Africa lacked 'political reality'.⁷²

Presented by journalist Robert Kernohan, the programme challenged the idea that South Africa should be considered exceptional and argued that British coverage was riddled with double standards.

⁷⁰ H. Greene, 'The Conscience of the Programme Director', 1965. Speech cited in WAC, R3/60/3, News and Current Affairs Meeting Minutes, 1 Feb. 1977

⁷¹ Hugh Greene MSS, University of Oxford, Dep c 900, Draft Manuscript, H. Greene, 'The Rebuilding of German Broadcasting' (Undated), 4-6.

⁷² WAC, R19/2 052/1, Access South Africa – 'Vain Hopes and Double Standards', tx. 21 Oct. 1972.

Fieldhouse recalls the broader view within the British media that anti-apartheid material needed to be countered as 'propaganda' in *Anti-Apartheid*, 431.

My complaint is that we are tolerant of black Africa's attempt to find a political expression for its personality – while we regard the white African reaction as the abominable crime of the twentieth century.⁷³

Nearly 15 years later this argument continued to be made about coverage of South Africa. One letter writer to the *Telegraph*, in 1986, complained that 'every day' there was 'an anti-South Africa item on the BBC and ITV news, but nothing whatsoever about the other side of the story'.⁷⁴

Despite these concerns, it is unarguable that many news and current affairs programmes on both the BBC and ITV took a strong position on the apartheid state in the spirit of Greene's dictum, producing output that was neither neutral nor objective on apartheid in any conventional sense, and which had the potential to challenge British incomprehension about the Apartheid regime. John Arlott, as we have seen above, compared the South African regime to the Nazis on *Any Questions?*, a point of reference which was mined again in Richard Dimbleby's description of the Sharpeville massacre for *Panorama* in 1960. Dimbleby compared the aftermath of the massacre to scenes at the liberation of Belsen (from where he had famously reported), offering a powerful indictment of the apartheid regime in a broadcast which, Smith has argued, signposted a new level of anti-apartheid commitment in British broadcasting. Smith has noted, 'If Richard Dimbleby...was prepared to compare Sharpeville with Belsen, the message was clear: South African government

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Letter from Mr DJ Hastings, *The Daily Telegraph*, 11 Aug. 1986.

policy was not a matter about which the BBC could remain neutral'.⁷⁵ While the presentation of the apartheid regime as Nazi was not common on British television it did happen for a third time in a schools broadcast in 1971. Here, in a narrative about the racial classification of South African schoolgirl Sandra Laing, presenter Michael Smee told his audience that this kind of racism (as well as racism in Britain) 'led Hitler and the Nazis to the murder of six million Jews'.⁷⁶ Replying to an audience complaint about bias in the programme Smee defended his position with reference to the Greene dictum. 'Do you imagine there are two sides to all moral questions?...Apartheid is a political solution to a problem which most people in the world think is an immoral solution'.⁷⁷

On ITV, Thames television's *This Week* series repeatedly attacked apartheid, much to the fury of the South African government who withdrew visas from the production team.⁷⁸ One *This Week* episode challenged, through dramatic reconstruction, the death in custody of Stephen Biko, using fiction to hammer home a message that was

⁷⁵ Smith, 'Apartheid...', 253.

⁷⁶ WAC, R16/889/1, Schools Programmes Contemporary History, 'Apartheid in South Africa', tx. 2 Jun. 1971. Laing had been racially classified as 'coloured' despite having two white parents, a judgment which prevented her from attending her school. The BBC went on to make a documentary film about the case, 'In Search of Sandra Laing', in 1977. Sanders has analysed Antony Thomas's award winning ATV documentaries about the Laing case in *South Africa and the International Media*, 41-2.

⁷⁷ WAC, R16/889/1, Schools Programmes Contemporary History, 'Apartheid in South Africa'.

⁷⁸ ITA Archive, File 3996150, South Africa.

difficult to convey in news and current affairs.⁷⁹ *This Week* seemingly tried to appeal to the instincts of the British public, criticising the sporting ethics of the South African rugby team, a programme described by Conservative MP, and consistent defender of South Africa, Patrick Wall, as a ‘shocking misuse of sport to put over biased propaganda’.⁸⁰

Facing repeated challenges from the South African embassy, Thames television consistently defended their position in similar terms to Greene’s dictum. Jeremy Isaacs explained to the ITA, ‘We have to accept sooner or later that reporters in television have minds of their own, and we cannot always be surprised if they express them, especially on a matter of conscience.’⁸¹ Public support was also given to *This Week* by the ITA itself, although this body was concerned that Thames was treading a fine line on impartiality. While the ITA publicly defended the company against challenges from the South African embassy, in private its members were less sure about *This Week*’s position (as we shall see below).⁸²

At their most heated, current affairs programmes both on the BBC and ITV could and did pass as anti-apartheid propaganda. *This Week* episode, ‘There is No Crisis’,

⁷⁹ Dramatic reconstruction of Steve Biko’s life and murder was famously given a world stage by Richard Attenborough’s film *Cry Freedom* in 1987, based on the book by South African journalist Donald Woods.

⁸⁰ ITA Archive, 3996149, Wall to Lord Aylestone, 2 Aug. 1968. *This Week*, ‘the Good Ladies of Jo’Berg’, tx. 19 Sep. 1968, ‘The Afrikaner: To Win at All Costs’, tx. 1 Aug. 1968 and ‘Steve Biko: Lonely and Miserable Death’, tx. 8 Dec. 1977.

⁸¹ ITA Archive, 3996149, *This Week*, Note by Jeremy Isaacs, 14 Nov. 1969.

⁸² ITA Archive, 3996150, *This Week*, Meeting of the IBA, 23 Feb. 1978.

broadcast in 1976, was taken up and shown by the Anti-Apartheid Movement in London and Ipswich.⁸³ Similarly, BBC 2's *Man Alive* documentary from 1970, 'The End of Dialogue', included anti-apartheid propaganda material created by the banned Pan Africanist Congress party.⁸⁴ In local broadcasts, an even stronger position was sometimes adopted. On BBC Radio London's *Black Londoners* programme, a feature on three men condemned to death in South Africa in 1983 concluded with reporter Sonia Fraser outlining how people could express their opposition. 'If you want to demonstrate your solidarity for the struggle in South Africa, you can go to the Embassy in Trafalgar Square and join an all night vigil'.⁸⁵ While this broadcast did include a snippet from a pre-recorded interview with Casper Venter from the South African Embassy, even this was not allowed to pass without comment. To Venter's argument that the international community did not protest about terrorism against South Africans, *Black Londoners*' Ronnie Smith replied, 'Does that sound like sour grapes to you?'.⁸⁶

Programmes of this nature led to vociferous criticism from members of the British Conservative Party, some of whom went so far as to allege that the BBC had its own

⁸³ ITA Archive, 3996150, *Anti-Apartheid News*, Nov. 1976.

⁸⁴ WAC, R3/54/3, News and Current Affairs minutes, 27 Nov. 1970.

⁸⁵ WAC, R78/3 124/1 South Africa, *Black Londoners*, tx. 8 Jun. 1983. This programme was broadcast in advance of the executions of Jerry Mosololi, Simon Mogoerene and Marcus Motaung for attacks on South African police stations in 1979. The men were hanged the following morning. For analysis see South African Democracy Education Trust, *The Road to Democracy in South Africa, 1970-80: Volume 2* (Pretoria: UNISA, 2004), 486-7.

⁸⁶ WAC, R78/3 124/1 South Africa, *Black Londoners*, tx. 8 Jun. 1983.

foreign policy on South Africa.⁸⁷ The heart of these complaints of bias, which resonated in the press too, held that it was not for broadcasters to take sides, but just to give information to enable the public to make up their own minds. Writing in the *Telegraph*, Simon Heffer praised Peter Snow (contrasting him with Michael Buerk) on the basis that Snow ‘never forgets that his role is as a cypher between those who make the news and those who wish to learn it’.⁸⁸

This view was shared by many within British news and current affairs broadcasting. Minutes of discussion at the IBA in 1978 recorded ‘a general view among members that recent programmes about South Africa had not given a balanced picture of the situation in that country’. Programmes must, the IBA concluded, give ‘the viewpoint of the South African government and its supporters...as well as that of its internal and external critics’.⁸⁹ Commenting on a complaint from the South African embassy that its programmes had been biased against the regime, a senior executive at Thames Television, reassured the ambassador that it was ‘the firm and settled policy of Thames to maintain complete impartiality’.⁹⁰ Underpinning this commitment was the idea that there were two sides to the South African story, thinking rooted in the ‘liberal imagination’, which could not comprehend the irrational aggression of

⁸⁷ WAC, R78/2 763/1, Meeting between Lord Hill, Charles Curran and back bench Conservative MPs, 23 Feb. 1972. This comment was made by Harold Soref (MP for Ormskirk, Lancashire). See also Sanders, *South Africa and the International Media*, 124. Criticism emanated particularly from members of the Monday Club. For the positioning of this group on South Africa, see Schwarz, *White Man's World*, 208-9.

⁸⁸ Simon Heffer, ‘A Bad Case of Disdain’, *The Daily Telegraph*, 7 Jul. 1986

⁸⁹ IBA Archive, File 996150, Meeting of IBA, 23 Feb. 1978.

⁹⁰ IBA Archive, File 3995567, the ITA to the South African Ambassador, 28 Apr. 1970.

apartheid. When, in 1974, the BBC decided to broadcast an edited version of a Pan Africanist Congress film about the effects of South Africa's homelands policy, *Last Grave at Dimbaza*, the Corporation, for balance, offered the South African government airtime to broadcast a film of identical length alongside.⁹¹ For the BBC, the South African government was morally entitled to defend itself against the anti-apartheid narrative of *Last Grave at Dimbaza*. Production notes argued:

The film deliberately leads its audience to believe that nothing but extreme poverty and degradation exists in the urban townships and in the rural Bantustans. This is no more true than the picture of contented, well-nourished Africans that the South African government puts forward in its publications – but on what grounds does the BBC prefer to believe one version to the exclusion of the other?⁹²

The principle of neutrality sat heavily on British broadcasters and no-doubt softened criticism of the apartheid regime despite Greene's dictum. Even those who were outspoken opponents clearly felt that their criticism took them outside the comfort zone of their professional values. Michael Buerk, who as we have seen was in-effect expelled from the country by the apartheid regime, recorded feeling uncomfortable when he received flowers from Neil and Glenys Kinnock on his return to Britain. 'It made me feel dishonest and a fraud, caught on the wrong side of all my barriers'.

⁹¹ The films were broadcast under the title 'South Africa: Two Points of View' as part of the *Man Alive* series, tx. 12 Dec.1974. For alternative analysis see Sanders, *South Africa and the International Media*, 41.

⁹² WAC, File T64/95/1 *Man Alive: South Africa. Two Points of View*, Notes (undated) by Jann Parry.

Buerk continued: 'I was wedded to the old BBC ethos of detachment, of separating fact and opinion'.⁹³ Without doubt, overt displays of anti-apartheid sentiment were not tolerated. When in 1986 the BBC discovered that editorial assistant Sarah Crowe had sung the 'Black' national anthem, *Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrika*, and made a clenched fist salute at a political meeting to commemorate the Kinross mine disaster (in which 177 miners had lost their lives), she was dismissed and Greene's dictum did not come to her aid.⁹⁴ Board of Management minutes noted that while 'the BBC had declared that it was not impartial in the matter of racism, the ADG [Assistant Director General], had pointed out that BBC journalists were expected to be non-participants in events they were covering'.⁹⁵

The style of broadcasting preferred in current affairs by executives at both the BBC and the ITA offered an anti-apartheid perspective with sufficient subtlety that allegations of bias could be denied. Key within this approach was a documentary style in which the voice of the presenter receded, allowing (ostensibly) contributors to express their own views unfettered by the editorial steer of programme; 'Afrikaners condemning themselves out of their own mouths', as the ITA's Bernard Sendall explained.⁹⁶ This approach, however, inherently softened the presentation of the

⁹³ Buerk, *The Road Taken*, 334 and 343.

⁹⁴ 'Journalist dismissed over salute', *The Times*, 11 Oct. 1986.

⁹⁵ WAC, 78/3, 125/1, South Africa, Board of Management minutes, 13 Oct. 1986.

⁹⁶ See John Corner, *The Art of Record: a Critical Introduction to Documentary* (Manchester and New York, 1996), 31. ITA Archive, 3996149, Bernard Sendall to Robert Fraser concerning 'The Afrikaners', 30 Apr. 1970.

regime, muting its extremism and humanising its perpetrators. It was, through broadcasting, the 'liberal imagination' in action.

The subtle approach had been lauded by television executives as early as 1960⁹⁷, and was exemplified by two sets of broadcasts on South Africa, the first by Hugh Burnett in 1968, and the second by David Dimbleby, broadcast in 1979 and 1980. Burnett's two 1968 documentaries, *White Africa* and *The Heart of Apartheid*, gave perspectives on apartheid respectively from the point of view of white and Black South Africans. Initially, Burnett only made *White Africa*, which was broadcast in January 1968, but the success of the programme led him to add a further episode in the same style, giving a Black perspective, which was broadcast (alongside a repeat of *White Africa*) in September of the same year.⁹⁸

Burnett made his programmes by interviewing people introduced to him through contacts at the South African Foundation, having been put in touch with this quasi-independent organisation through the South African embassy in London.⁹⁹ Initially, executives at the BBC were concerned that this relationship might produce a pro-apartheid offering. Huw Wheldon, then Controller of Programmes, refused to sign-off the production, believing that an early draft from Burnett looked like 'a Party

⁹⁷ See Smith, 'Apartheid...' on the reception in 1960 of documentaries by Denis Mitchell, 283-5.

⁹⁸ *White Africa* was first broadcast on 25 Jan. 1968. It was rebroadcast as the first of a two-part documentary on 5 Sep. 1968, followed by *Heart of Apartheid*, tx. 10 Sep. 1968.

⁹⁹ WAC, T56/298/1, 'White Africa', Note from Burnett to Head of Documentary Programmes: Television, 24 May. 1967.

Political Broadcast for the South African Government'.¹⁰⁰ A note from Burnett, however, changed his mind. He explained: 'if an openly anti-white South African commentary was added it would be a most unsubtle way of presenting a documentary. Any condemnation should flow out of their mouths, not ours'.¹⁰¹

Despite initial scepticism the BBC were delighted with the programme. After the broadcast, Wheldon wrote to Burnett. 'I saw WA this morning. Excellent. I am very glad I saw it'.¹⁰² With minimal commentary, Burnett broadcast the views of the white South Africans that he had interviewed, set against images of 'the countryside, streets and general detail that go to make up the country'.¹⁰³ Given that the interviewees had been selected by an organisation signposted by the government, there was little scope for the South Africans to allege bias, but an anti-apartheid message nonetheless came through to British critics. Mary Malone, in the *Daily Mirror*, wrote that *White Africa* 'came through like a fiery bolt by the simplest of devices'.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰⁰ WAC, T56/298/1, 'White Africa', Note from Richard Cawston (Head of Documentary Programmes: Television) to Burnett (incorporating Wheldon's note), 13 Jun. 1967. Wheldon refused to sign-off the programme (unless reassurances were given by Burnett), Wheldon to Cawston, 31 May. 1967.

¹⁰¹ WAC, T56/298/1, 'White Africa', Note from Burnett to Head of Documentary Programmes: Television, 1 Jun. 1967.

¹⁰² WAC, T56/298/1, 'White Africa', Wheldon to Burnett (undated).

¹⁰³ WAC, T56/298/1, 'White Africa', Letter from Burnett to contributor and white farmer (undated).

¹⁰⁴ Mary Malone, 'A Black View – at Home and Abroad', *Daily Mirror*, 26 Jan. 1968.

Eleven years after Burnett's documentaries, David Dimbleby made a five part series on Afrikaner culture and history, under the title of *The White Tribe of Africa*.¹⁰⁵

Unlike Burnett's programmes, Dimbleby's voice was prominent in the documentaries, as he interviewed both Black and white South Africans. Similar to Burnett, however, Dimbleby's criticism of the regime was muted, as he focused in the series on trying to discover the roots of Afrikaner thinking on apartheid. As part of his analysis of Afrikaner attitudes, Dimbleby highlighted the role of Britain in shaping their ideology. Recalling the Boer War, he explained how 'their farms were laid waste. Wives and children herded into camps... [British tactics]...have never been forgotten.'¹⁰⁶

As was the case with Burnett's programmes, Dimbleby's measured approach was well received both by the BBC and critics. Richard Last, in the *Telegraph*, praised the series for its 'quiet deliberation', while the *Daily Express*'s critic commented that Dimbleby 'leant over backwards trying to be fair'.¹⁰⁷ Within the BBC, the Corporation's Director of News and Current Affairs described *The White Tribe of Africa* as 'distinguished and very illuminating'.¹⁰⁸

The Limits of the 'Liberal Imagination'

¹⁰⁵ The programmes broadcast in this series were: *The Trekkers*, tx. 8 Jan. 1979, *A Band of Brothers*, tx. 15 Jan. 1979, *The Grand Design*, tx. 22 Jan. 1979, *The Politics of Fear*, tx. 29 Jan. 1979, *Walking on Coals*, tx. 14 Jul. 1980..

¹⁰⁶ *The White Tribe of Africa: A Band of Brothers*, tx. 15 Jan. 1979.

¹⁰⁷ Richard Last, *Daily Telegraph*, 16 Jan. 1979, James Murray, *Daily Express*, 30 Jan. 1979.

¹⁰⁸ WAC, File R3/60/1, News and Current Affairs Meeting Minutes, 16 Jan. 1979.

Not everyone, however, was similarly impressed by these subtle critiques of apartheid, which, I argue, were underwritten, like British attitudes more generally, by the prevalence of the 'liberal imagination'. Looking back, James Sanders criticised *The White Tribe of Africa* as 'retrogressive and confusing'.¹⁰⁹ While the anti-apartheid movement was trying to highlight the barbarity of the regime, the BBC was seemingly trying to rationalise it. Writing to the Corporation at the time of Burnett's *White Africa*, South Africa media expert Len Clarke complained that the programme had presented 'the "Liberal" viewpoint...far too frequently, giving the impression that liberals abound in South Africa, when in fact they are almost extinct'.¹¹⁰ For Clarke, the BBC was failing to see the extremism of apartheid, presenting it instead from within its own understanding of political normality. Clarke complained, 'It was rather like a film of Nazi Germany which shows Jews painted with the Star of David, but fails to mention the concentration camps'.¹¹¹

Clarke's observation helps to characterize British broadcasting's stance on apartheid more generally, specifically concerning the tendency to soften the realities of the regime so that it could be rendered within 'the liberal imagination', in terms that British broadcasters found familiar and comprehensible. Trying to make sense of apartheid on British terms meant explaining the regime as a reasonable entity, thereby

¹⁰⁹ Sanders, *South Africa and the International Media*, 42.

¹¹⁰ WAC, T56/298/1, White Africa, L Clarke to 'The Programme Director: BBC Television', 21 Jun. 1968. Clarke, under the pseudonym John Laurence wrote a raft of work challenging the apartheid regime. See Sanders, *South Africa and the International Media*, 96-7.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

masking its barbarity and irrationality. It was this tendency that ultimately shaped British output on apartheid, **both** that which was meant to be neutral and that which was subtly intended not to be.

The 'liberal imagination' prioritised the ethnic affinity between Britons and South Africans, an idea which played out through broadcasting, especially in discussions about whether it was fair to deny programmes to the South Africans which were seen as core to their identity as (almost) Britons. For example, when it proved impossible for broadcasters to relay coverage of the wedding of Charles and Diana to South Africa, because of the involvement of members of *Equity* and the Musician's Union, there was an outcry at the denial of this service. Derek Bond, ex-President of *Equity*, told the *Daily Mail*: 'About half the population of South Africa is basically British and desperately loyal...To deny them of this coverage is absolutely inconceivable'.¹¹² In parliament, Ian Lloyd led 25 Conservative MPs to sign a Commons motion in protest.¹¹³ Similar thinking made broadcasters reluctant to deny to the South Africans other high points of British culture. When, in 1977, Peter Hain asked the BBC not to relay the FA Cup final to South Africa because it would provide 'a morale-boosting fillip to the white minority', Charles Curran was not convinced.¹¹⁴ The Corporation, he told one Union leader, was 'in the business of communication' and was not

¹¹² Stuart Collier, 'Royal Wedding TV Ban on South Africa', *Daily Mail*, 11 Jul. 1981.

¹¹³ Hansard (Commons), Vol: 146, Col: 7689, 21 Jul. 1981.

¹¹⁴ This was part of Hain's broader work promoting the sports boycott as Chairman of the Action Committee against Racism. WAC, T66/119/1, South Africa Press Office, Hain to Curran, 22 Apr. 1977. See Peter Hain, *Don't Play with Apartheid: the Background to the Stop the Seventy Tour Campaign* (London, 1971).

prepared 'to resort to political discrimination' by stopping the broadcast from reaching South Africa.¹¹⁵

So far as news and current affairs was concerned, British broadcasters were too often determined to believe that affinities between the nations meant that they could deal with the apartheid regime as a reasonable partner, were too wedded to the idea that there must be two sides to the South African story, and that balance was an appropriate technique to establish truth. Confronted by a regime that was a manipulative, brutal pariah, British broadcasters looked for, and saw instead, a reflection of themselves, injecting reason and rationality where there was none to be found. This tendency was prevalent in British state responses to apartheid more broadly, as the South African regime was treated as if it was itself liberal and decent. In 1957 the British High Commissioner in South Africa told the Secretary of State for Commonwealth Relations that senior officers in the South African Police Force were, 'for the most part good and reasonable men'.¹¹⁶ As late as 1985, Malcolm Rifkind (Minister of State at the Foreign Office), following pleas to intervene in South African 'treason trials' against anti-apartheid activists, explained that he still considered that the South African judiciary 'enjoy[ed] considerable independence'.¹¹⁷

No broadcaster illustrates this tendency and its consequences better than the BBC's Editor of News and Current Affairs, later the Assistant Director General, Alan

¹¹⁵ WAC, T66/119/1, South Africa Press Office, Hain to DA Hearn (General Secretary of the Association of Broadcasting Staff), 9 May. 1977.

¹¹⁶ NA DO35/10599, High Commissioner to the Earl of Home, 14 Feb. 1957.

¹¹⁷ LMA/4421/01/03/001, Rifkind to Geoffrey Bindman, 15 Apr. 1985.

Protheroe, whose determination to see the Apartheid State as a fair broker (and belated realisation that it was impossible to do so) does much to highlight British attitudes writ-large. Protheroe was a conservative figure, deeply wedded to the BBC's principles of neutrality, a Territorial Army colonel who, Simon Jenkins reported in *The Times*, 'would be well cast as a Tory agent'.¹¹⁸ Determined to protect the BBC's ability to operate within South Africa, Protheroe made a series of visits to the country to meet high profile government figures during the State of Emergency. These visits convinced him that British broadcasters should show the regime the courtesy of legal cooperation, following liberal principles of fair play. Returning from a visit in 1985, Protheroe told the News and Current Affairs weekly meeting that there was a 'genuine concern in South African governmental circles about the perceived effects of the censorship' in the State of Emergency.¹¹⁹ Believing the State of Emergency to be an environment where the BBC could operate, Protheroe called for staff to be 'meticulous' in their observation of South African restrictions while 'protesting about any attempt to extend their application'.¹²⁰ Protheroe saw two sides to the apartheid story. He reported back to the BBC that the ANC representative he had met while in South Africa had 'brushed aside my mild question about which African country would be the model for black rule'.¹²¹ Moreover, Protheroe thought that broadcasters were to some extent responsible for the breakdown in relations with the regime. He explained to BBC colleagues:

¹¹⁸ Simon Jenkins, 'Bias and the Beeb: Does the Charge Stick?', *Sunday Times*, 5 Oct. 1986.

¹¹⁹ WAC, R78/3 124/1 South Africa, News and Current Affairs minutes, 26 Nov. 1985.

¹²⁰ WAC, R78/3 124/1, South Africa, Board of Management minutes, 3 Dec. 1985.

¹²¹ WAC, R78/3 124/1, South Africa, News and Current Affairs minutes, 3 Dec. 1985.

There is a long history of misunderstanding with (quite incontrovertibly) largish helpings of BBC malpractice there....The South Africans maintain they are not unhappy about being criticised: but criticism should be the outcome of accurate investigation and fair reportage, and the BBC, of all organisations, should be the objective and impartial reporter.¹²²

According to Protheroe's thinking, South Africa's government was, at least to some extent, a fair broker in a conflict, an idea that was rooted in a broader British inability to see the unreasonable core of apartheid.

As skilled and determined media manipulators, who had dedicated a fortune to trying to improve coverage in the international arena, the South African regime was more than capable of exploiting this kind of naivety, a reality epitomised by the history of *Last Grave at Dimbaza*. BBC commitment to neutrality had prompted the Corporation to contact the South African Embassy in advance of the screening of what was initially an hour-long film to ask if they would like to send a representative to contribute to the post-film discussion. The Embassy, however, tapped into the BBC's liberal principles to secure a far better deal as we have seen, shrinking *Last Grave at Dimbaza* to under half an hour and filling the extra time with a film of their own. JV Delport, the Embassy's Director of Information, knew exactly what buttons he was pressing when he responded to the *Man Alive* team: 'I would have thought that one's concern (in terms of the concept of British fair play) is shown by showing

¹²² WAC, R78/3 124/1, Note from Alan Protheroe, 21 Sept. 1983.

for the same length of time in the same programme a film on the same subject as seen through the eyes of the South African government'.¹²³

It was left to Len Clarke to point out to the BBC the realities of what they had allowed to happen. Following the broadcasting of *South Africa: Two Points of View*, Clarke wrote to Director General Charles Curran telling him that 'the time is overdue for the BBC to realise that South Africa with probably the world's most skilled and best-financed propaganda ministry, may have found chinks in the BBC's armour of impartiality'.¹²⁴ While the apartheid state was manipulating the BBC into showing its own propaganda, the Corporation was trapped in a mentality where it saw competing interests in South Africa as two sides in a game of cricket. Production notes for the programme highlighted the importance of looking at the rival films in the correct 'batting order'.¹²⁵ Responding to the BBC's decision to allow the South African government to broadcast its own response to *Last Grave at Dimbaza*, Adam Raphael in the *Guardian* complained, 'South Africa's propaganda counter-offensive scores its biggest coup tonight'. For Raphael and others, the BBC had missed the point about what the South African regime truly was, and how it should be treated. After all, he concluded, 'The South African Broadcasting Corporation is not about to give equal time to those it attacks nightly'.¹²⁶

¹²³ WAC, T64/95/1, Man Alive, *South Africa: Two Points of View*, JV Delport to D Filkin (Producer: Man Alive), 18 Sep. 1974.

¹²⁴ WAC, T64/95/1, Man Alive, *South Africa: Two Points of View*, Len Clarke to Charles Curran, 10 Dec. 1974.

¹²⁵ WAC, T64/95/1, Man Alive, *South Africa: Two Points of View*, Production notes (undated).

¹²⁶ Adam Raphael, 'The Good News Machine', *The Guardian*, 12 Dec. 1974.

It was not, however, only the BBC that struggled to understand that the apartheid state could not be taken at its word. In 1973, Robert Moore, Senior Lecturer in Sociology at the University of Aberdeen, wrote to the IBA questioning whether it was legally and morally correct to allow the advertising of holidays in South Africa given that Black viewers would not be allowed to partake of these products.¹²⁷ Fearing that Moore's critique might have illuminated a breach of race relations and/or advertising standards legislation, Lord Aylestone (Chairman of the IBA) wrote to the South African Tourist Corporation asking them to clarify the position.¹²⁸ The South Africans duly affirmed that Black tourists 'were welcome to stay in any hotel of their choice' and the IBA took them at their word, telling another anti-apartheid letter writer that they had received a 'categorical assurance' from the South African Tourist Corporation on the matter.¹²⁹

Of course, in reality, this assurance was a nonsense, but, like the BBC, the IBA was seemingly unable to comprehend the extent to which the apartheid state could not be trusted. Notes from a meeting between the IBA and the South African Tourist Board two years later recorded a different reality, that there would be no discrimination because 'anyone who was likely to find themselves subject to South African racial

¹²⁷ IBA, 3995904 South African Advertising, Robert Moore to Chairman of the IBA, 1 May. 1973.

¹²⁸ IBA, 3995904 South African Advertising, CL James (South African Tourist Corporation) confirms the position to the IBA, 8 Jan. 1974.

¹²⁹ IBA, 3995904, South African Advertising, Aylestone to Executive Secretary of the Anti-Apartheid Movement, 9 Jan. 1975.

laws would discover this at the entry permit stage'.¹³⁰ Seemingly unmoved by this significant difference, the IBA continued to broadcast commercials which offered products to white Britons only. All the while, the banning of political advertising meant that requests from the Anti-Apartheid Movement to secure advertising time on ITV were consistently declined.

This positioning by the IBA and the BBC may betray a British brand of racism, or apologism for the apartheid regime. But it is perhaps better understood as a product of being trapped in a particular post-imperial mind-frame, wherein a liberal commitment to broadcasting detachment could not withstand, or sometimes even understand, the barrage of propaganda and intimidation that came from apartheid South Africa. This was a tendency that similarly permeated inter state relations. Incredulous that Environment Minister, Patrick Jenkin, had accepted South African assurances in 1985 that they would dismantle measures of petty apartheid, the Anti-Apartheid Movement's David Kenvyn wrote that he was 'saddened that a Minister of Crown should fall such an easy victim to the racists' propaganda'.¹³¹

In this environment, the position of broadcasters, of maintaining the Greene dictum, of defending neutrality, of subtle challenge, was untenable. In 1986, this reality was exposed by challenges made to the guardian of neutral news broadcasting Alan Protheroe, following an appearance on the Radio 4 programme, *Feedback*. In this programme, Protheroe was criticised by a listener who complained that coverage of

¹³⁰ IBA, 3995904 South African Advertising, Notes by Head of Advertising Control, 14. Mar. 1975.

¹³¹ LMA/4421/01/010/01, Kenvyn to Jenkin, 19 Aug. 1985.

South Africa was ‘totally biased against the whites there’.¹³² Protheroe answered the charge with a response that tried to mesh together Greene’s dictum with the principle of neutrality. He claimed:

...the BBC is not impartial as regards apartheid. I think it was Sir Hugh Greene when he was Director General, made a very plain statement that the BBC could not be impartial about things like apartheid and it could not be impartial about the straightforward issues of law and order. There’s no impartiality in that. There is, however, in the reporting, we insist on a degree of neutrality. In other words, we insist on reporting as fully as we can the actions, the events, the philosophies, the ideologies and the developments of both sides, and that it is critically important, and we have done that over a very, very, long period of years.

This response summed up the tangle that broadcasters had fallen into as regards apartheid and highlighted the limits of the liberal imagination, which was crumbling in the face of challenges from all sides. It was seized upon by listeners who were astonished to hear a senior BBC news executive seemingly confirm that the Corporation was not unambiguously committed to the principle of impartiality. On the following edition of *Feedback*, presenter Chris Dunkley explained that responses to Protheroe’s interview had been ‘immediate, irate, and almost entirely consistent’. He read out a typical letter from one listener who recalled reacting with ‘absolute

¹³² WAC, R78/3 125/1 South Africa, *Feedback*, tx. 20 Jun. 1986.

amazement'. The listener complained, 'How dare he [Protheroe] assume...that everyone in this country sees South Africa as he does?'¹³³

Protheroe's broadcast soon came to the attention of the Chairman of the Conservative Party, Norman Tebbit. Tebbit wrote to Alasdair Milne, then Director General, asking for reassurance that the BBC's values were not being eroded 'by it being seen to be partial in what we both believe is a good cause'.¹³⁴ Responding in the News and Current Affairs meeting, Protheroe explained that 'what he should have said was that the BBC had no view on any issue, and would seek to maintain its impartial stance across the board'. Meanwhile, Milne assured Tebbit that Protheroe's position on apartheid, as broadcast on *Feedback*, was 'not consistent with the BBC's policy'.¹³⁵ Milne's response, however, was not sufficient to quiet Tebbit. Unable, through a second letter, to gain what he considered a clear answer from Milne or Protheroe (about whether Protheroe had spoken on behalf of the BBC), and having failed to secure a public apology, Tebbit wrote for a third time to Milne as well as to the new Chairman of the BBC Board of Governors, Marmaduke Hussey.¹³⁶ Tebbit listed a series of questions which he insisted the Corporation should answer 'with a straight "yes" or "no" and "only by a simple yes or no"', relating to its stance on apartheid.¹³⁷

¹³³ WAC, R78/3 125/1 South Africa, *Feedback*, tx. 27 Jun. 1986.

¹³⁴ WAC, R78/3 125/1, South Africa, Tebbit to Milne, 6 Nov. 1986.

¹³⁵ WAC, R78/3 125/1 South Africa, News and Current Affairs Meeting, 11 Nov. 1986 and Milne to Tebbit, 17 Dec. 1986.

¹³⁶ WAC, R78/3 125/1, Tebbit to Hussey, 19 Jan. 1987. For analysis of Thatcher and Hussey see Jean Seaton, *Pinkoes and Traitors: the BBC and the Nation, 1974-87* (London, 2015), 306-8.

¹³⁷ WAC, R78/3 125/1, Tebbit to Milne, 19 Jan. 1987. Tebbit similarly pushed the BBC to 'point-by-point' rebuttals over its coverage of the US bombing of Libya. See *Pinkoes and Traitors*, 309.

Milne responded that he was ‘puzzled’ by Tebbit’s ‘persistence in this matter’, perhaps a thinly-veiled accusation of support for apartheid, but he did answer the ‘yes’ or ‘no’ questions, confirming that Protheroe had spoken on behalf of the BBC but that the BBC’s position on apartheid was neutral.

Tebbit’s protracted engagement with this issue might, as Milne implied, tell us something about his government’s attitude to the apartheid state.¹³⁸ It certainly illuminated Conservative disaffection with what was perceived as leftist bias in the BBC, concerns that had led to the appointment of Hussey, and would soon lead to Milne’s (forced) resignation only days after his reply to Tebbit’s ‘yes/no’ letter.¹³⁹ Conservative concerns were not primarily about South Africa, but this particular correspondence clearly hit a nerve.

Like Milne, Protheroe prematurely left his role at the BBC in 1987, driven out by Conservative complaints about news bias.¹⁴⁰ As a man who was instinctively inclined to pursue a neutral approach to apartheid, it had dawned on him only very slowly that the State of Emergency in South Africa was inherently unreasonable and could not be processed within the BBC’s traditional frames of neutrality and balance. Writing in exasperation to the Director General in 1985, Protheroe explained that he now

¹³⁸ Dubow has noted how Britain (alongside the United States and West Germany) became part of a ‘troika of conservatives’ that gave breathing space to South Africa in the 1980s. See Dubow, *Apartheid*, 195.

¹³⁹ For broader discussion of the relationship between Thatcher’s government and the BBC see Seaton, *Pinkoes and Traitors*, 1-13.

¹⁴⁰ M. Leapman, ‘Alan Protheroe: Combative BBC executive who clashed with the Thatcher Government’, *The Independent*, 11 Apr. 2013.

realised that South African laws ‘enable the security service to do anything they like to anyone they like’.¹⁴¹ Protheroe’s belated ability to see apartheid South Africa for what it was, reflected far wider currents of broadcasting, and broader British, responses to apartheid. Meanwhile, his (and Milne’s) departure from the BBC, highlight the British state’s on-going commitment to neutrality (as the government of the day perceived it), a commitment still underpinned by a fracturing liberal imagination.

The extremism of the apartheid state could not be processed easily within the mind-frame of this ‘liberal imagination’. Facing something that was fundamentally irrational, British broadcasters tried to square circles with little success, mostly failing to present the realities of life in South Africa to the British public. When Michael Buerk returned to Britain after his expulsion from South Africa, he was asked by the new editor of the documentary series *Everyman*, Jane Drabble, to make a programme reflecting on his time there.¹⁴² Through the vehicle of *Everyman*, which was made in the BBC’s Religious Affairs department, Buerk managed to show footage of a township murder that BBC News had ‘refused to broadcast’ because it was too shocking.¹⁴³ Fearing BBC proscription, Buerk recalled his relief that the murder was not cut out from this programme at least, as BBC managers instead argued about the frequent inclusion of the word ‘fuck’ in the dialogue. As apartheid raged on, amid a liberal inability to comprehend its horror, BBC executives debated whether the bad language of South African streets was appropriate for broadcast in British homes.

¹⁴¹ WAC, R78/3 125/1, Protheroe to Milne, 28 Aug. 1985.

¹⁴² *Everyman*, ‘No Easy Road: Michael Buerk’s South Africa’, tx. 18 Oct. 1987.

¹⁴³ Buerk, *The Road Taken*, 344.

‘Sometimes’, Buerk recollected, ‘I felt I was in a world as Kafkaesque as that of the apartheid bureaucrats, if better intentioned’.¹⁴⁴

Ultimately, the ‘liberal imagination’ restricted the parameters of British engagement with apartheid. Unable to recognise or respond to the realities of the regime, Britain retreated to what it did understand, paternalistic ‘liberal’ empire, rooted in a commitment to gradual change, fair play and an instinctive weariness of all hues of radicalism. In this atmosphere, while anti-apartheid protesters who knew better banged at the doors of Westminster and Broadcasting House, Britain sustained, in broadcasting and in politics, a working, if increasingly fraught, relationship with the apartheid state until its demise. This relationship was underpinned by constructions of affinity, by shared interests, and by varying degrees of British sympathy for the racial predicament of South Africa’s whites. Looking from afar at South Africa as children of its lost Empire, Britain saw and projected visions of itself, and mostly failed to see the brutal realities of the apartheid regime.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid. p.345.